



Tadashi Tsufura



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Growing up in a little farming town in California, Tadashi Tsufura likely never envisioned the influential life he would lead. After they left camp, his family moved to the other side of the country in Seabrook, New Jersey. He went on to serve in the Korean War and worked briefly as a chemical engineer. After moving to New York City to change careers he fell into, and in love, with teaching. In 1976, Tad would become the first Japanese American principal of a public school in New York; all of which came with its own set of difficulties. “No one wanted Japanese as educators and all the unions here battled to keep me off,” he says. But his skills as a teacher, and the respect he cultivated inside the classroom continues to resonate with his past students who still call him to have lunch and catch up. As both of his parents were teachers and community leaders, it would seem that Tad was destined to go into education.

But the consequences of incarceration, the health effects of hard physical labor in the cannery and the war itself would take a serious toll on his mother’s health. Tad’s brother was waiting to be drafted into the U.S. army while Tad’s cousin in Japan was a kamikaze pilot. The weight of such dissonance wore her down into a deep depression, for which a doctor prescribed a lobotomy. Tad wrote about his mother’s illness in a statement to the Wartime Relocation Commission in 1981. “Neither my father nor I questioned the authority or professional wisdom of the doctor. Now I know the operation is irreversible and was then in the experimental stages. I wonder if an informed citizen would have allowed this fate for his parent. I must live with this trauma and regret.”

Tad is 86 years old and still lives in New York with his wife. We spoke over

the phone.

Tell me about your background and where you grew up.

I was born in Los Angeles, California and my father was a minister there. He was a rebel-rouser and as a minister of a Buddhist church, he got in a battle with a bishop there so then he had to leave. We moved to a little town called Parlier, California, about twenty miles from Fresno. It was farm country at that time, mostly grape and vegetables grown by the Japanese farmers. My dad became a minister of that small town. My mother was a teacher so they started a Japanese school, too. During the summer we had to make some money so as a family we did field work. Parlier was predominantly a very powerful Japanese community. California needed workers so Japanese came and worked.

At that time, you have to recall that the government was all powerful. No one questioned the government. The Mexicans worked wherever they could and the Japanese worked with whoever hired them. That's how American segregation worked at that time. You worked and lived where you were allowed to.

How did your parents originally end up in California?

My father was here before. He went back to Japan to get married and he came back. My father initially came alone in 1920, I think as a minister. Japan was starving so they allowed workers to immigrate all over the world.

What happened in your town when the war broke out?

I was in elementary school when the war started you know. And we were all friends. When the war started, the next day we went to school and they were making fun of us saying, "Hey you're a Jap, you're an enemy," and I knocked a kid down. The principal came and knocked *me* down. Those things I still remember but I also had a pretty good teacher. Once the war was going on I was a sixth grader and this guy did everything in the world to make our lives as pleasant as can be. We had a restricted time, we couldn't leave the house after 5 'o' clock at night. But this teacher, Mr. O'Connell, I

still remember. He was terrific. Those are the people you try and be like.

Do you have one specific memory or story about being in Gila River?

While we were in camp, we lived in one room. Initially we went to the mess hall to eat with our parents because we didn't know anybody. But as we grew accustomed to the camp, we stopped going with our parents and we went as soon as we had our own ticket to go eat. And one of the things that I regret now for not really knowing was how painful it must have been for all of the parents because they lost control of their kids.

The only thing you had to do was go back to the room to sleep. And in the morning you take off, and you don't come back or see your parents until you go to bed. You went whenever you wanted to. And you don't tell anybody what you're doing during the day. So in retrospect I'm saying what a painful thing it was, and must have been, for the Issei group.

I know you wrote about what your mother went through. Can you talk about what happened and her depression?

When the war started, my oldest brother was waiting to be drafted into the army. Then my father's brother in Japan had sons about the same age as my oldest brother. And one was in the kamikaze.

For my mother, for one to fight the other, she couldn't deal with it. And she couldn't deal with people calling her the enemy. And she couldn't deal with working in the factory, sometimes 12 hours a day. She was not a strong woman. Also, I'm a stupid 14-year-old at Seabrook and I don't have the ability to do things like wash my own clothes and things. She was doing that. Learning to cook on a coal stove that we'd never used before, trying to keep the house warm by coal heat. Go shopping for food. Cooking and trying to keep the house clean, and it was just too much for any woman, I think. Especially a weak woman. Physically, my mother was not strong. And it just took its toll. But then I was too young to really realize, you know.

To realize what was happening?

How much help she needed or what was happening, yeah. And remember at that time, no one sued doctors so when the doctor said hey, she'll be cured by having a prefrontal lobotomy, who in the hell knew what that was? And we agreed. They just put a paper in front of you and you sign it. But I learned later on that it was an irreversible kind of thing.

What was the effect of that on your mother?

Well you know, there was no cure. Because it's irreversible, also it affects your mind so that it doesn't move your way. And curing is an impossibility after such an operation. The prefrontal lobotomy cuts away certain parts of your brain from functioning.

This is the full statement Tad gave on speaking about his mother's tribulations at the New York Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians Hearing in 1981:

Within a month of being 'freed' from the relocation camp in Gila River, Arizona, my mother, who had to do hard manual labor in the cannery, broke down and was committed to a mental hospital in Trenton, New Jersey. There was not one person in the institution who could speak Japanese or work with her. Because of this lack of communication, I had to make a painful weekly trip to help and interpret. The pain was compounded by the lack of understanding of depression as an illness at the time, particularly in my culture. When the doctor at the hospital said my mother needed an operation (a lobotomy), I thought it would help make her well, and neither my father nor I questioned the authority or professional wisdom of the doctor. Now I know the operation is irreversible and was then in the experimental stages. I wonder if an informed citizen would have allowed this fate for his parent. I must live with this trauma and regret.

I do not wish to tell the Commission of the personal trials and the difficulties I encountered in attaining my current position as principal. I can only assure you that my sufferings were minute when compared with those of our immigrant parents. They were forced to leave the

relocation camps, most with little or no money, and with little or no ability to communicate in the new hostile environment. I look back in awe at their courage and strength.

Why do you think the parents and most Nisei never spoke about camp?

When the war was going on we were the enemy. After the war, we were still the enemy, so dead silence continued until 1976 when Michi Weglyn published her book *Years of Infamy*. Until then, no one wanted to bring the camp subject up. Also, when we left camp for Seabrook Farms in September of 1944, the war was still going on and we went to a town 5 miles away to shop for clothes and other necessities. There were signs in some store windows that said “NO JAPS ALLOWED.”

I became Principal in a public school in 1976, same year as Michi’s book was published. No one wanted Japanese as a principal but the Greenwich Village Parent Body refused to accept anyone else despite the objections of the Unions. Another reason the topic of incarceration was off limits.

How did you first become a teacher? Was it through your parents that you wanted to become an educator?

No, what happened was I was in the Korean War and when I came back we all wanted to make some money. So I went to school to become a Chemical Engineer. By then my father had moved from Seabrook to Cleveland and so I went to a small Engineering School there. I became a Chemical Engineer but had no delight, I just couldn’t stand looking at chemicals everyday and so my brother had moved to New York and he was a photographer doing quite well then. I quit my job and went to New York and I was looking for a job. We were still enemies, remember and no one wanted to really hire a Japanese Chemical Engineer. I thought maybe in New York I could get a better job. Then I went to interview but when you get there they say well sorry, we don’t have an opening right now.

Really?

Well, of course they will hire somebody else. I mean this is how they deal with housing too. You go some place that was advertised, you look it up and you get there and they say oh, it's just been rented. Those were the answers that they gave to Japanese at that time. But in the newspaper I saw that there was an opening for teachers. There was a shortage of teachers anyway because at that time the teachers' pay was probably the lowest then. In fact I took one course at Brooklyn College and I became an instant teacher. One course in education, that's all I did. That's how short they were of teachers because it was probably the lowest paying profession at that time. But I said what the heck, I always liked New York. So I became a teacher and I learned it was my calling.

How did you find that out? Did something specific happen?

Because you know it was exciting for me to try and teach kids. And then it was in junior high where most teachers didn't want to teach. But I wasn't the best student in camp and I wasn't the best student when I went to Seabrook, to Bridgeton High school. I was quite a truant. I knew how to get by a teacher. In camp I hardly went to school except the teachers, they didn't care anyway, so why go to school?

But once I started teaching kids, they test you. They did make fun of me in the beginning. They'd talk Chinese when they see me. But then they learned that I also demanded that they study and I was skilled in letting them know that they're not leaving the room until I tell them that they are permitted to leave. They eventually decided that I really cared for them and I did. I didn't want to be a teacher like the teacher that I had in camp. I guess my father and mother were teachers so it's something in me. I stuck to being a teacher, I enjoyed it. I remember the first month pay I got \$240.00 for one month.

I'm still in contact with many of my students. They email me. They phone me when they come to town.

That's quite an honor that they remember you in such a great light.

Remember when I became principal in 1976, I was probably the only

principal they ever had who was an Asian. And I was willing to bet that I was the only Asian principal on the continental U.S. at that time.

I want to ask you about the redress. Do you think that the amount given to the community was fair?

The Isseis and Niseis should have the right to accept or not accept the money without guilt, for some of them were never able to get back the good life that some of us have been able to. It is because of their strength (the Isseis) that I would tell them straight out that we were able to surmount the problems in this society.

Going back to that day [the redress committee hearing], they made a monument in Washington. And they put the names of all the camps on there. But it's not the monument I wanted. I wanted a monument not only for the Japanese but for the next immigrant group. They built a monument to the Japanese there with the name of the camps but that doesn't do anything. What I wanted was that we'd be the first to have a little garden. Then, each year they have another immigrant group, and then the whole area is dedicated to the people who come to America. But in Washington they would never do that. *[laughs]*

When you started hearing about Muslim Americans and the connections people made to the camps, does it make you worried?

No, I'm not afraid. I don't know where this will go.

The Muslims have to evolve themselves. No matter what anyone says. And they will. I was in one of the things where a Muslim speaker came up and spoke at a group to the Japanese community here in New York City, and she was telling of her problem and of Donald Trump wanting to put them into concentration camps. And I told her, if I were you, or if I were the leaders of the Muslims, I would say, Donald Trump, I accept what you do and what you're saying. And I hope that you will send us all to concentration camps. But you also said that you will do anything for this country. So if you are willing to do that, why not take all your hotels, and properties, and put all the Muslims in those hotels? I said, and feed them, and clothe them, just as

you did the Japanese? Since you are willing to sacrifice all for this country, you should also ask your friends to give up their property, and incarcerate all the Muslims in there. And you know, if you say it that way, I know Donald Trump will back down.

Sadly, Tad passed away due to COVID-19 on March 29, 2020, just five days after his wife passed from the virus. He will be remembered as a beloved mentor and teacher.

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